Remarkable Women with Fairbury Connections Made Their Mark on History

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Many readers of these Fairbury history stories have asked if more articles can be written about women who lived in the Fairbury area. Unfortunately, older newspaper accounts and historical records often focused primarily on the activities of men. As a result, it can sometimes be difficult to locate detailed information about women in early local history.

However, when we look carefully through various records, we can still find many fascinating stories about women connected to the Fairbury area. Some of these women lived during the frontier era. Others became involved in national reform movements. Some worked in new industries or contributed to the war effort. Others devoted their lives to educating local students.

When several of these stories are placed in chronological order, they reveal how women connected to the Fairbury area played important roles in both local and national history.

One of the earliest stories connected to the Fairbury area dates back to the famous "Winter of the Deep Snow" of 1830-1831. This winter was one of the most severe ever recorded in Illinois. Snow began falling early in the season and continued for weeks, eventually covering the prairie in deep drifts that made travel extremely difficult.

During this time, the Darnall family lived about four miles south of present-day Fairbury along Indian Creek. Valentine Darnall and his family were the first settlers in what later became Livingston County. According to early accounts, Mr. Darnall had traveled away from the cabin when a major snowstorm struck the region. As the storm intensified and snow continued to fall, he became concerned about the safety of his wife and children, who were waiting for him at their small frontier log cabin.

The winter conditions made travel extremely dangerous. Deep snow covered the prairie, and many settlers struggled to survive the long winter months. During this difficult time, Mrs. Valentine Darnall helped care for the family and endured the hardships of frontier life as she waited for her husband to return home through deep snow. She prevented their precious livestock from freezing to death by moving the animals into the family’s log cabin with her children. Stories like this remind us that pioneer survival depended heavily on the courage and endurance of women.

During the severe winter of 1830–31, Mrs. Valentine Darnall brought their precious calves into the family cabin to keep them from freezing—an example of the strength and resourcefulness of early Fairbury women.

Several decades later, another young woman from Fairbury would find herself involved in an entirely different adventure.

Harriet Virginia Fogle was born in Fairbury in 1893. She was the daughter of Victor and Fanny Fogle and the granddaughter of John Coomer Jr., who built the first house in Fairbury in 1857. Harriet grew up in Fairbury and attended local schools before graduating from Fairbury Township High School in 1911.

After high school, Harriet continued her education at Ward-Belmont in Nashville, Tennessee. She later attended Vanderbilt University, where she was the only female student enrolled in the engineering department during the 1914-1915 school year. At that time, it was very unusual for a woman to study engineering.

Harriet later married Dr. Warren W. Bell and eventually moved to California. During the 1920s, she became involved in the motion picture industry. Newspapers reported that Mrs. Warren Bell, formerly Harriet Fogle of Fairbury, had entered the moving picture business as a film producer.

Her production company was known as the H.V. firm, which apparently used the initials of Harriet Virginia. At a time when the motion picture industry was still developing, and very few women held leadership positions, Harriet Fogle was helping produce films in California. Her career placed her among the early pioneers of the American film industry.

Another woman with strong Fairbury connections later became active in a national reform movement.

Margaret Agnes Cairns-Munns was born in Fairbury in 1870. Her father, Rev. James Cairns, served as a Baptist minister in Fairbury and helped dedicate the new Baptist church building in 1865.

Margaret later became involved in the Women's Christian Temperance Union, one of the largest and most influential women's organizations in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The organization promoted temperance and worked to address a variety of social issues affecting families. Alcohol caused many social problems not only in Fairbury, but across the entire country.

Margaret Cairns-Munns eventually rose to a very important leadership role within the organization. She served as National Treasurer of the Women's Christian Temperance Union from 1915 until 1946. This position required significant responsibility, as the organization operated nationwide and managed substantial financial resources.

Her long service in this national leadership role demonstrated the confidence that members of the organization across the country placed in her.

During World War II, another woman with Fairbury roots served the country in a very different way.

Virginia James Claudon was born in Fairbury in 1920, the daughter of Chester J. Claudon Sr. and Leona Carlotta James Claudon. She attended Fairbury Township High School before continuing her education at Wesley College in Georgia and later at the College of William and Mary in Virginia.

After the United States entered World War II, Virginia volunteered for service work connected to the war effort. She first worked in hospital service and later became involved in intelligence-related duties. Eventually, she joined the Red Cross and was sent overseas.

During the war, she began broadcasting from Karachi. These broadcasts were designed to counter enemy propaganda aimed at American servicemen in the Pacific by the voice known as Tokyo Rose.

Virginia Claudon's broadcasts included music, news, and positive messages aimed at boosting the morale of American troops. Her work demonstrated how women contributed to the war effort in many different ways beyond the traditional roles often associated with wartime service.

The final woman in this group is someone many Fairbury residents personally remember.

Cathryn L. Wink Frisby was born in 1921 and grew up on a farm northeast of Fairbury. Her family had deep roots in the area dating back to the nineteenth century when her ancestors emigrated from Germany and settled in Eppards Point Township.

Cathryn attended Fairbury schools and later entered the two-year teacher training program at Illinois State Normal University in 1940. She completed the program in 1942 and soon began teaching.

During World War II, she also worked part-time at Caterpillar Tractor Company while continuing her teaching career. Company officials initially wanted her to work in an office position because of her educational background. Cathryn insisted she was capable of operating a machine tool in the factory and went to work producing equipment for the war effort.

In 1948, she married George William "Bill" Frisby, a World War II veteran who had served in the European theater. Cathryn taught both in rural country schools and later in the Fairbury school system. Many residents remember her years of teaching at Westview Grade School.

Former students often recall that Mrs. Frisby expected her students to work hard and was never afraid to express her opinions. At the same time, she cared deeply about her students' success and took pride in helping them learn.

When we look at the lives of Mrs. Valentine Darnall, Harriet Virginia Fogle, Margaret Agnes Cairns-Munns, Virginia James Claudon, and Cathryn Wink Frisby, several common characteristics stand out.

Each of these women showed determination and strength during the times in which they lived. Mrs. Darnall endured the hardships of frontier life. Harriet Fogle entered a new and rapidly developing industry. Margaret Cairns-Munns became a national leader in a major reform organization. Virginia Claudon contributed to the war effort through radio broadcasting. Cathryn Frisby spent her career educating generations of Fairbury students.

Although their lives were very different, all of them demonstrated courage, independence, and a willingness to take on challenges. Their stories remind us that women played an important role in shaping both the local history of Fairbury and the broader history of the nation.

The history of a community is not written only by its businesses, railroads, and public officials. It is also shaped by the lives of the women who helped build families, support communities, lead organizations, serve their country, and educate future generations.

These remarkable women with Fairbury connections are an important part of that history.